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Why edit handbooks?

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Why edit handbooks? Well, I can tell you why I edited the one handbook I that have completed, which was undertaken in collaboration with Roger Lee, Linda McDowell and Peter Sunley (Leyshon et al, 2011) and I suspect that it is the reason most people undertake the task: because I was asked. I have edited a number of edited volumes and I was never commissioned to write any of them. Indeed, it was usually a struggle to convince publishers to publish the ones that did get completed, and I would have edited more if I and my various co-editors could have persuaded publishers that the project was both worthwhile and financially viable. I am in the process of working on another project at present, and once more it is something of a struggle to convince publishers that it will have an audience in a crowded market.

So, why are publishers are more enthusiastic about Handbooks than straightforward edited volumes? I think the main reason is that handbooks approximate an academic journal but in book form: handbooks can be framed as 'must have' publications, the absence of which reflects badly on a library and which, if linked into a series of similar Handbooks across cognate areas, as was the one that I edited, can generate linked sales for archival purposes. As such Handbooks, like journals, can be priced at levels way beyond the pocket of the individual buyer: they are akin to an academic brand, an essential resource that must adorn the stacks of any decent University library.

To be sure, if the editors of Handbooks do their jobs properly, then their higher desirability compared to run of the mill edited volumes, which can be idiosyncratic and of variable quality, also comes from their curatory function. We managed to get a wonderful collection of authors who were willing to contribute chapters and, having contributed as an invited author myself to various Handbooks in the past, there can be a degree of esteem and prestige in receiving such an invitation to contribute, and a willingness to write for a book that may become a key reference within a discipline.

In accepting the brief to produce a Handbook on economic geography, my fellow editors and I were well aware that we were entering a market already populated by early movers in the form of *The Oxford Handbook of Economic Geography* (Clark et al, 2000) and *A Companion to Economic Geography* (Sheppard and Barnes, 2000), so we wanted to try and create something distinctive. The route we chose was to explore the contingent and contextual nature of research in economic geography, and to explore the economic geography 'problematic' through time and space. This was an interesting if challenging project. It was collaborative, a process which I always enjoy, working with people whose research I respect and admire. If we judge the success of the project by the reviews the book has received, then it was reasonably successful and reviewers appreciated the way the book was structured to reflect different types of economic geography research. But this carefully constructed structure was also a weakness, in the development process at least, because as all editors know, a multi-authored, multi-chapter project such as this – there were 25 chapters in all – only moves as fast as the slowest authors. Some of the originally commissioned authors dropped out, for all kinds of reasons, and in some cases their replacements did too. Due to the structure, we opted to replace rather than cut. This had some impact on the distribution of contributors, and reviewers rightly highlighted how skewed the contributions were towards Anglo-American geography, and this would need to be addressed if there was ever to be second edition.

However, I would have to think long and hard before taking on such a task or indeed of editing another Handbook. A project of this kind requires a careful balance between fitting all the components together and ensuring that it is delivered in a timely fashion. I think it safe to say that we erred more

towards the former than the latter which means that this took a long time to complete, and then when we had finally closed the door on outstanding chapters, it took a good chunk of a period of research leave on my part to turn the manuscript into a manageable enough beast that the other editors could work on it. By then it had gone on so long that some of the authors that had delivered their chapters on time and to the brief we had given them rightly become restless about the disappearance of their chapters into a pre-production limbo.

Just as I sat down to write this, the publisher of the Handbook, SAGE, sent me royalty statements for the two books I have edited for them: the Handbook and *Alternative Economic Spaces* (Leyshon et al, 2003), and they confirm why publishers are keener on Handbooks than edited volumes. Even though *Alternative Economic Spaces* was published 10 years ago, accumulated royalties have still not covered the costs of contributors' advances and indexing. Indeed, it looks like it will be at least another two years before it breaks even. However, after two years all such costs for the Handbook have been covered and the book is even generating modest editor royalties, which of course reflects a much higher royalty rate for the publisher. That's why publishers like Handbooks, and that's why they will continue to commission academics to edit them: they make money.

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